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# Are the Senses Silent?

## Travis's Argument from Looks

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### 1. Introduction

Echoing Kant's remark that "[t]houghts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant 1998: A51/B75), Charles Travis (2004, 2013a) argues that perceptual experiences are not only 'blind', but 'silent' in that they have no representational content at all. For Travis, the role of perceptual experience—by which he means *conscious* perceptual experience—is to present aspects of the world upon which truth may turn. Hence, "[i]n perception, things are *not* presented, or represented, to us as being thus and so. They are just presented to us, full stop" (Travis 2004: 65). According to Travis, then, perception is presentational in the sense that it makes perceptual objects—for example, a sunset, or the sun's setting—available to consciousness, but is not in the business of representing that anything is the case; e.g. that the sun is setting. The latter, being propositional, is not an object of perceptual awareness, but rather of thought or judgement (Travis 2013b). While such content may be constitutive of beliefs or judgements, which are typically thought of as 'downstream' from, or causally dependent upon, perceptual experience, to assimilate perception to a state of this kind involves a kind of category mistake that, for Travis, renders thought's purchase on the world unintelligible (Travis 2007).

The view that perceptual experience is representational is widespread in philosophy and cognitive science. However, it is rarely explicitly argued for in any detail.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, for *S* to perceptually experience the world in some sensory modality, or combination of modalities, is a matter of *S*'s representing the world, or objects in it, as being some particular way. That is, perceptual experiences have *representational content*. In 'The Silence of the Senses', Travis (2004, 2013a) challenges this orthodoxy by arguing that experiences do not represent the world as being any particular way, since they are in an important sense equivocal or indeterminate between many possible contents. Thus, although perception 'presents objects' in the sense of making them available to the conscious subject, it does not present them *as being some way or other*, and so is not a representational or intentional phenomenon (Travis 2004: 93).<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I examine one of Travis's arguments—the *argument from looks* (sect. 2)—to clarify the nature of the challenge it poses for the representational view, and to highlight several possible lines of response. My aim is not to defend Travis *per se*, but rather to elucidate his argument in a way that avoids various misunderstandings which have become prevalent in the literature (sect. 3). Once these misunderstandings are corrected, the argument can be seen to pose an important and, in my view, unresolved challenge for many (though not all) forms of representationalism (sect. 4). As such, Travis's argument from looks places the onus upon representationalists to explain not only how experiences come to have representational contents, and what those contents are, but the explanatory role, or roles, that such contents are supposed to play, and how—or indeed whether—they are available to perceivers for the purposes of thought, reasoning and action (sect. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of recent attempts to do so include Byrne (2009), Siegel (2010), Schellenberg (2011a; 2011b) and Brogaard (2015a).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of such views, see Locatelli & Wilson (2017).

## 2. Perceptual Representation

In 'The Silence of the Senses', Travis (2004; 2013a) targets the view that conscious visual experience (hereafter: 'experience') constitutively involves, or is reducible to, the representation of mind-independent objects and their properties. The view that experiences have representational content—known variously as *representationalism*, *intentionalism*, or *the Content View*<sup>3</sup>—is often contrasted with the view that experiences fundamentally involve a primitive or unanalysable relation to the objects of experience. Variations of the latter view—known as *relationalism*, *Naïve Realism*, or *the Object View*—differ in emphasis, but share a common commitment to the essentially relational nature of experience.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, many relationalists deny that experience can be analysed in representational terms, claiming either that the perceptual relation is non-representational, i.e. *anti-representationalism*, or that the content that representationalists posit is explanatorily redundant. A third family of hybrid or 'mixed' views holds that experience possesses both representational and relational elements, thereby combining aspects of each of the preceding views. I do not consider hybrid views in detail here except insofar as they posit a representational element to experience, and so are also targets for Travis's argument.

The notion of representation that Travis opposes—*p-representation*, as I will call it—may be contrasted with other forms of representation that he explicitly allows. Causal covariation, for example, as occurs when light falls upon the retina forming an image of some external scene, might be thought to constitute a kind of representation, albeit one that is incapable of misrepresenting except by some externally imposed convention (see below). Similarly, the rings in a tree trunk might be said to 'represent'

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<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the distinct, but related, view that the phenomenal character of experience supervenes upon, or is identical to, its representational content, also commonly referred to as 'intentionalism' or 'representationalism'.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell (2002), for example, characterises experience as a three-place relation between subject, object and some particular standpoint or perspective, whereas Martin (2002, 2006) emphasises the constitutive role of external objects in experience.

the tree's age, though the content of this representation is imputed by us, *qua* conscious observers, and not by the tree or its rings. Here again it seems inapt to talk of misrepresentation if—due to freak weather conditions, for example—the tree's age and number of rings do not coincide. Rather, under such conditions the rings might simply be said *not* to represent its age.<sup>5</sup> 'Representation' here functions as a kind of shorthand that indicates the presence of a particular kind of cause. Following Travis (2014: 314), let us call such forms of representation *effect-representations*.

The possibility of misrepresentation typically arises via the appeal to some kind of standard function, or norm. Scientific explanations of the workings of various parts of the brain, such as the visual cortex, typically invoke this notion of representation in describing states or processes that carry information about some external stimulus or other subsystem. Here, the relevant system may enter a state that is normally associated with a specific cause as a result of a deviant chain of events—for example, by direct stimulation with an electrode—thus creating the possibility for misrepresentation. Even where such representations casually impact upon the subject's experience, however, their contents need not feature as the contents of any personal-level cognitive state; i.e. they may be entirely sub-personal. Travis does not rule out the existence of sub-personal representations, nor is his view (*pace* Burge 2005) incompatible with modern psychological or neuroscientific explanations of perception. Rather, the argument targets a distinctly philosophical notion of representation that is held by many, though not all, philosophers who advocate representational views of conscious perception.

To gain a clearer understanding of the kind of representation that Travis has in mind, it is helpful to examine the conditions by which he characterises it, which are as follows (Travis 2004: 63):

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<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, *we* might represent the tree's rings as not indicating its age, where this further representation is distinct from the rings themselves.

- (i) *Objectivity*: "The representation in question consists in representing things as so (thus, truly / veridically, or falsely / non-veridically)."
- (ii) *Face Value*: "It has, or gives perceptual experience, a face value, at which it can be taken or declined (or discounted)."
- (iii) *Givenness*: "It is not autorepresentation [*representation-by* the subject]. (It is allorepresentation [*representation-to* the subject], though here, not crucially.)"
- (iv) *Availability*: "When we are thus represented to, we can recognize that, and how, this is so; most pertinently, we can appreciate what it is that is thus represented to us as so."

These necessary, though not sufficient, conditions are intended to capture the particular flavour of representationalism that Travis attributes to his opponents, who include Martin Davies, Gilbert Harman, John McDowell, Colin McGinn, Christopher Peacocke, John Searle, and Michael Tye, amongst others (*ibid.* 58). To this list we might add Byrne (2009), Siegel (2010), Brogaard (ms, 2015b) and Schellenberg (2011a, 2011b), who defends a hybrid view comparable to Tye's (2007) phenomenal externalism.

Travis's use of "representing things as so" in (i) might be taken to suggest that p-representation must be conceptually structured, rather than non-conceptual. However, since two of his stated targets—namely, Peacocke (1992a) and Tye (1995)—explicitly endorse forms of non-conceptual content, we can assume that Travis intends for his argument to apply to both conceptual and non-conceptual views. Similarly, while the wording of (i) and (ii) above might suggest that p-representation is necessarily propositional, i.e. assessable for truth or falsity, a broader interpretation of *Objectivity* admits of any form of content that possesses accuracy conditions—a notion that

admits of varying degrees—that relate to the states of mind-independent objects and their properties.<sup>6,7</sup>

In what follows, I will be primarily concerned with Travis's *Face Value* and *Availability* conditions, both of which are central to his argument from looks. Before presenting the details of this argument, it will therefore be useful to examine these conditions in greater detail, along with some considerations that motivate them.

### 2.1. *Face Value*

Part of the appeal of representationalism stems from the intuitive idea that every experience has a single and determinate 'face value' at which it may be accepted or declined, as captured in Travis's *Face Value* condition.<sup>8</sup> It follows from this conception of experience that they convey some particular 'way', or state of affairs, that things are perceived as being, i.e. a representational content whose accuracy conditions describe the circumstances under which that experience may be considered veridical. To accept an experience 'at face value' is to judge that things are the way that they appear. To decline its face value, or to withhold judgement, is to doubt or remain neutral about the veridicality of one's experience, respectively—as might occur after having knowingly taken a hallucinogenic drug, or when wearing inverting lenses, for example. Such content is typically thought of as being systematically related, or identical, to the contents of perceptual judgements or beliefs that it would be natural for the subject to form on the basis of that experience (cf. Siegel 2010: 51). Crucially, however, perceptually experiencing the world to be  $\phi$  does not commit the subject to believing that  $\phi$  is true, though it might predispose them towards forming such a

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<sup>6</sup> For a representationalist view that resists this broader interpretation, see Glüer (2009).

<sup>7</sup> I examine whether Travis's argument may be successfully extended to non-propositional content in sect. 3.1 below.

<sup>8</sup> 'Determinate' is used here in the sense that is opposed to determinable, and in relation to the assignment of contents to experience, rather than the determinacy of those assigned contents. The above claim is therefore compatible with the contents of experience being indeterminate in the sense of having vague, i.e. not fully determinate, accuracy conditions.

belief. On the present view, then, experience is distinct from judgement or belief *simpliciter*, and functions as a “non-factive propositional attitude” in its own right (Byrne 2009: 437).

The idea that experiences have univocal face-value content might seem so obvious or compelling to some that it can be difficult to understand how it could possibly be false. One way of rejecting *Face Value*, however, is to hold that such content only arises when a subject judges, or otherwise interprets, her experience as indicating that something is the case. The proponent of such a view need not deny that perceptual beliefs have contents that are systematically related to, or causally dependent upon, experiences. Rather, the claim is that the resulting content is not itself derived from, or identical to, a content of experience, since experiences themselves are non-representational. Thus, whatever tokening of content the representationalist takes to occur at the level of experience may equally be taken by the anti-representationalist to occur ‘downstream’ of experience at the level of judgement or belief-formation.<sup>9</sup> On the plausible assumption that perceptual belief is explanatorily subsequent to experience, the latter need have no content independently of the former. This is Travis's view.

A second way of rejecting *Face Value* is to deny that experiences have only one such content in favour of them having many; i.e. *content pluralism* (cf. Chalmers 2006; Crane 2013). In this case, Travis's argument may be applied iteratively to each individual content that the content pluralist takes experience to have. Alternatively, one might hold that experiences have disjunctive contents—for example, that a given visual experience represents there to be a reddish-roundish-patch *or* a ball *or* a tomato, and so on, where each disjunct corresponds to some particular way that the world might be. This view, however, is compatible with *Face Value*, since we may regard the entire disjunction as constituting the face-value content of experience, and so as what is ‘given’ in perception. Whilst Travis (2004: 72–73) raises doubts as to the aptness of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Mutatis mutandis* for non-conceptual and/or non-propositional contents.



disjunctive conception of perceptual content,<sup>10</sup> his argument may equally be taken to target views on which experiences represent multiple alternative states of affairs (cf. sect. 3.1).

## 2.2. Availability

Travis's notion of "recognizing", or *availability* as I will call it, is undoubtedly the most contentious of his four conditions, and admittedly less precise than one might hope. I take it, however, that this condition is motivated by constraints arising from *Face Value* and *Givenness*, since for an experience to have a face value that is given to the subject in perception, this content must in some sense be available to the subject such that they are in a position to accept or decline it. Were this not the case then, assuming that they were able to form any beliefs at all, subjects would simply find themselves 'saddled with' (to use McDowell's term) beliefs about their perceptual environment without any means of consciously registering or reflecting upon the content of their experiences, thus making accepting or declining those contents impossible. Aside from special cases like type-2 blindsight, this is not how perceptual experience strikes us. More importantly for present purposes, it is not how representationalists characterise their view, since it effectively collapses p-representation into a form of sub-personal or effect-representation.

*Availability*, then, has two main features. First, it requires the face-value contents of experience to be "recognizable", or cognitively available, to the subject on the grounds that "you cannot represent things to people as so in a way they simply cannot recognize as doing that" (Travis 2004: 63). By extension, then, it must be recognisable that experiences involve some form of representation, though this may require a degree philosophical sophistication that need not be present in all cases (see below). Moreover, such contents cannot simply be the result of the subject representing *to themselves* that something is so—what Travis calls "autorepresentation" (*ibid.* 61)—as with judgement

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<sup>10</sup> Not to be confused with *disjunctivism*—a view that Travis endorses (Soteriou 2014, 2016).

or belief. Rather, the content is 'given' to the subject in perception—i.e. "allorepresentation" (*ibid.*)—as per Travis's *Givenness* condition. Precisely what the relevant availability amounts to requires further specification, but I take a minimal requirement to be that, for any given experience, perceivers must be capable of grasping how that experience represents the world as being—or, to put it another way, what it would take for their experience to be accurate or veridical. P-representational content is therefore content *for the subject*.

The second main feature of *Availability* is that it requires the content of experience to be available (in the relevant sense) to the subject in virtue of the corresponding experience. This qualification is intended to rule out cases of conscious availability via some non-perceptual state, such as a judgement or belief, that is independent of, or explanatorily subsequent to, the experience in question. As noted above, it is entirely compatible with Travis's view that judgements and beliefs have representational content. Rather, what is at issue is whether experiences *per se* have content. If the proposed content were only recognisable in virtue of some further non-perceptual state, then it could equally be claimed that the content should be attributed to this non-perceptual state and not to experience.

*Availability* does not require subjects to be routinely aware that they are being represented to, nor that they are capable of reporting the contents or representational nature of their experiences—something which clearly requires a degree of philosophical and conceptual sophistication that may be lacking in many, or indeed most, subjects. Nor does it require that perceivers are capable of reliably determining whether the relevant accuracy conditions obtain, since they may be subject to some systematic practical or epistemic disadvantage, such as a persistent hallucination or illusion. Rather, in order to p-represent that  $x$  is  $\psi$ , the subject must be capable of grasping both (i) what it would be for  $x$  to be  $\psi$ , and (ii) that the relevant experience conveys that  $x$  is  $\psi$ , even if on reflection they judge things to be otherwise. This grasp may be tacit or implicit, and need not involve any explicit thought or knowledge that is

attributable to the subject. Nevertheless, the relevant content must be tokened in a way that is capable of featuring in the subject's reasoning such that they could form a conscious judgement or belief, or rationally justify such a belief, on the basis of it if required.

The precise formulation of this condition is delicate since one would not want to rule out the use of, for example, introspection or conceptual capacities, the exercise of which enables subjects to access the contents of experience, provided that such capacities are not themselves responsible for tokening such content independently of perception. In particular, subjects should not merely *infer* the contents of experience on the basis of, for example, their background beliefs or prior learning in a way that is compatible with the falsity of representationalism. To avoid these problems, we can gloss Travis's informal characterisation of *Availability* as follows:

*Availability\**: The representational nature and content of p-representations must be "recognizable", or cognitively available, to the subject solely in virtue of the corresponding perceptual experience, along with the operation of those non-representational capacities necessary to facilitate such recognition.

It is an important question whether the above condition would be acceptable to Travis's opponents, since much of his argument depends on it. However, some form of this condition does appear to feature in many representationalist accounts of experience. According to Susanna Siegel, for example, "the contents of an experience are conveyed to the subject *by her experience*" (2010: 28; emphasis added), whilst Alex Byrne (2009: 443) takes experiences to be belief-like states whose contents are available to the subject on the basis of how things non-comparatively look (see sect. 4.3). Nevertheless, it remains open to the representationalist to reject such a condition, perhaps on the grounds that it over-intellectualises the nature of perception (cf. Burge 2010), thereby generating a possible line of response to Travis. I discuss the

consequences of such a rejection in sect. 5 below, though Travis (2004: 84–93) also offers a separate argument against such views that I do not discuss here.

For present purposes, however, I will assume the above reading of *Availability*, though the details are no doubt controversial and may require further refinement to make this condition acceptable to proponents of the target view. However, since *Availability*, or something very like it, is entailed by both *Face Value* and *Givenness*, then the onus lies with the advocate of perceptual representation to give a satisfactory account of it.

### 3. The Argument from Looks

Travis's *argument from looks*, as I will call it, is just one of the arguments in what is an extremely rich and complex paper (Travis 2004, 2013a). It aims to establish that the notion of p-representation that I sketched above can play no role in a satisfactory philosophical theory of perception. If effective, this rules out a range of widely held views concerning the existence and role of representational content in visual perception, and by extension other perceptual modalities. Importantly, the argument leaves open whether other kinds of representation, such as sub-personal or effect-representation, may be attributed to perceptual states, though not to experiences as it is precisely the attribution of content to conscious perception that Travis opposes. Nevertheless, such positions constitute a substantial weakening of the target view, and so would still represent an important victory for Travis. The argument thus poses an important challenge to the representational view, though one that, as I argue in sect. 5, may ultimately prove surmountable.

Travis's argumentative strategy is relatively straightforward. Representationalists, he claims, are committed to experiences being p-representational. The evidence for this comes from prominent representationalists' own descriptions of their views, which I will not rehearse here (cf. Travis 2004: 58–60). However, according to Travis, the conditions for p-representation cannot be jointly satisfied, since *Face Value* and

*Availability* are mutually incompatible. Hence visual experiences cannot be p-representational, and so representationalism is false.<sup>11</sup>

The argument may be stated as follows:

- P1** If visual experiences were p-representational then their content would be recognisable in virtue of how, in experience, things perceptually appear, or look [to the subject].<sup>12</sup> (*Looks-indexing*)
- P2** Visual looks are incapable of making p-representational content recognisable since they are comparative and so equivocal between multiple contents.
- P3** Thinkable looks are incapable of making p-representational content recognisable since they are not wholly perceptual.
- P4** There is no further notion of looks that is both wholly perceptual and capable of making p-representational content recognisable.
- C1** (*From P2 through P4*) The content of visual experiences cannot be recognisable on the basis of how things look [to the subject].
- C2** (*From P1 and C1*) Visual experiences are not p-representational.

Travis's first premise makes the *pro tem* assumption that the most plausible way for the representationalist to satisfy *Availability* is for experiential content to be recognisable to the subject—or “indexed” to use Travis's term (*ibid.* 63)—on the basis of how things visually appear, or look.<sup>13</sup> This suggestion has *prima facie* plausibility

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<sup>11</sup> For alternative formulations of the argument, see Brogaard (2015a) and Raleigh (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Slightly different versions of the argument may be derived depending on whether or not appearances or looks are taken to be subject-specific, as indicated by the parentheses in P1 and C1, with corresponding versions of the following responses and objections applying to each.

<sup>13</sup> I take looks to be visual appearances, and so use these terms interchangeably.

since how one tells what the face-value content of one's experience is presumably depends upon the visual appearance that is manifested through the phenomenology of that experience. That is not to say that appearances are themselves representational or to be identified with the contents of experience. Rather, the suggestion is that looks enable us to *recognise* such contents, in turn making them available to consciousness. Thus, what fixes, or determines, p-representational content and what makes that content recognisable may be two different things—the former consideration being semantic, the latter epistemic. Whilst Travis does not always adequately distinguish between these two aspects of experience, *Availability* and *Looks-indexing* (i.e. P1) clearly concern the latter.

Premises two through four are concerned with the various kinds of looks that might perform such indexing, thereby making the resulting content available to the subject in the sense described above. Here, Travis identifies two distinct notions of appearance: “visual” and “thinkable” looks,<sup>14</sup> arguing that neither is capable of making p-representational content recognisable since the former contravenes *Face Value* (P2) and the latter *Availability* (P3). From this, along with what Travis takes to be conflicting constraints arising from these two conditions (P4), he concludes that experiences cannot be looks-indexed (C1), and so visual perception is not p-representational (C2). Assuming that vision provides the strongest case for the attribution of p-representational content, this result may be taken to generalise to other perceptual modalities, though Travis leaves this step implicit.

The argument from looks aims to present the representationalist with the following dilemma. In order to defend their view, they must either (a) elucidate some notion of looks that is capable of making the relevant content available—something that Travis argues is impossible—by rejecting one of P2 through P4, or (b) reject *Looks-indexing*, or one of Travis's other conditions for p-representation, substantially

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<sup>14</sup> I use the revised terminology of Travis (2013a) in preference to “looking like” and “looking as if” (Travis 2004) for reasons described below.

weakening and potentially undermining their view. To understand why this dilemma is pressing, however, it is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of Travis's notions of "visual" and "thinkable" looks, along with the reason why he thinks that no other notion of looks is capable of meeting the representationalist's requirements.

### 3.1 Visual looks

Visual looks, or *looks<sub>v</sub>* for short, are characteristic ways of appearing exhibited by objects solely in virtue of their visual effects upon the perceiver. Looks<sub>v</sub> thus identify some visually detectable appearance that is generated by all of the things which share a given 'look' (Travis 2004: 69–70). For an object to *look<sub>v</sub> like a lemon* is therefore for it to have the characteristic visual look that lemons typically (though not always) have—call this *looking lemonish*. Since looks<sub>v</sub> may be characterised in terms of an implicit or explicit comparison between objects that look like or resemble each another, they are often described as 'comparative looks' (cf. Chisholm 1957: 45).

To see why this generates a problem for the representationalist, consider the following example. Many things, not all of which are lemons, share the property of *looking lemonish*. Moreover, anything that, in the relevant respect, looks<sub>v</sub> like a lemon also looks<sub>v</sub> like a wax imitation lemon, or, to the untrained eye under appropriate circumstances, like a ripe lime, a lemon-shaped bar of soap, a hollowed-out lemon façade, a cartoon drawing of a lemon, and so on. Crucially, such resemblance relationships are symmetrical. Thus, if something looks<sub>v</sub> like a lemon, then a lemon also looks<sub>v</sub> like it. Each of these alternatives corresponds to a set of conditions under which the experience may be considered accurate or veridical, and so constitutes a distinct representational content in its own right. Thus, for all that something might *look<sub>v</sub> lemonish*, there are innumerable ways that the world might actually *be*, all of which share that same visual appearance. As far as visual looks go, then, the same experience might equally be said to represent any, or indeed all, of the innumerable

ways in which it can look<sub>v</sub> to me *just like* there is a lemon before me; i.e. that there is a wax imitation lemon, a hollowed out lemon-façade, and so on.

It follows from this, Travis argues, that nothing about an object's *looking<sub>v</sub> φ* can identify the content of that experience as *representing φ*; e.g. that something *is* a lemon, as opposed to one of its visually indistinguishable alternatives, or 'ringers'. Note that while many of Travis's examples involve high-level or 'rich' properties, such as being a lemon, this argument generalises, and so what goes for lemons also goes for peccaries, ovals, and blueness (Travis 2004: 73). In each case, the relevant look<sub>v</sub> is also exhibited by a host of ringers, which in the preceding cases would include pigs, circles seen obliquely, and white things cleverly illuminated by blue light, respectively. Thus, according to Travis, looks<sub>v</sub> "do not decide any particular representational content for any given experience to have" (*ibid.* 69), and so fail to satisfy *Face Value*. Rather, visual looks are, in an important sense, equivocal between contents, and so incapable of making any one such content recognisable, as per P2.

One possible response to this line of argument is as follows:

*Response 1:* Experiences do not represent concrete states of affairs—e.g. there *being* a lemon, something yellow, ovoid, etc.—but rather something's merely *appearing* lemonish (yellowish, ovoid, etc.) in a way that may be satisfied by any sufficiently lemon-like object, or combination of objects, that exhibit(s) the relevant appearance.

One way of fleshing out this suggestion would be to posit a notion of appearances that lies somewhere between a purely subjective effect upon the perceiver—the presence of a given sensation, for example—which would violate *Objectivity* (see below), and the representation of external objects' appearance-independent properties, such as their shape, colour, and so on.<sup>15</sup> One such notion represents what we might call *appearance properties*: *looking lemonish*, *looking yellow*, and so on. This approach, however,

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<sup>15</sup> Travis goes on to deny that there could be any such intermediate notion (sect. 3.3).



goes against the standard representationalist account of appearances, according to which for some object *o* to look *F* is for the subject to represent *o* as *being F*, rather than to represent *o* as having the property of (merely) *appearing F*—call this *F'*. Thus, rather than appearances being a function of the propositional attitude of seeing or experiencing, as per the standard account, on the present account they enter into the content of the experience. Since any object can, with sufficient setup, instantiate *F'* even though it does not instantiate the property that typically causes it, i.e. *F*, such content can tell us little about the underlying appearance-independent properties of external objects. Even if the proposal works, then, which is doubtful, it comes at a considerable ontological and epistemic cost.

If, on the other hand, looks<sub>v</sub> are taken to be purely subjective then this raises further questions about which cases should count as veridical. If experiences merely represent that, for example, *o looks F*, then this will be true, and so veridical, of any object exhibiting the relevant look in a way that potentially extends to cases of illusion and even hallucination, each of which involves something genuinely looking *F*.<sup>16</sup> This again weakens the explanatory role of p-representation, in the worst case making the relevant content necessarily veridical, since every case in which an object looks<sub>v</sub> *F* to *S* will be one in which it is (veridically) represented by *S* as having the property of *looking<sub>v</sub> F*, i.e. *F'*. In the absence of some further factor or mechanism that determines how the world would need to be in order for that experience to be veridical, such contents are effectively self-verifying. As such, they are capable of indexing only epistemically narrow, or 'thin', contents concerning the state of the subject's visual system or visual phenomenology, and not the mind-independent properties of external objects, thereby contravening *Objectivity* (cf. Byrne 2009: 449–50). But since this is precisely the job that looks<sub>v</sub> were supposed to do, then such looks are either redundant, since they fail to explain how *Availability* can be met, or, if they do not perform this

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<sup>16</sup> In the case of hallucination, the 'object' in question may be of a non-standard kind; e.g. a brain state.

role, they collapse into a form of sub-personal or effect-representation. Either way, *Looks-indexing* fails.<sup>17</sup>

A closely related suggestion is that experiences do not represent determinate states of external objects and their properties, but rather the entire range of scenarios that could generate a subjectively matching visual appearance, or what Peacocke (1992b) calls "scenario contents". Such content may be expressed in terms of a disjunction or function from possible worlds to truth values that captures the range of ways of filling out space that generate the relevant visual appearance. On this view, looks<sub>v</sub> do not determine only one way for the world to be, but rule in (or out) a range of possible configurations of the subject's perceptual environment. Travis objects to such contents on the basis that the resulting looks "point in no one direction" (2004: 72), yielding a representational content that is "incoherent" (*ibid.* 73). Indeed, one could argue that scenario content is incompatible with *Face Value*, and so fails to constitute p-representation.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, if it is possible to accept or deny that the actual world is one of the ways that a scenario content indicates, then this might be thought to offer the representationalist a way round Travis's argument. A potential objection to this proposal, however, is that, in the absence of any further constraints upon which configurations of the subject's environment can feature in scenario content, then such contents do not pick out mind-independent properties of external objects, but subjective properties of experience itself: that the perceiver is being appeared to *F*-ly, and so on. If so, then the proposal will fail to satisfy *Objectivity* and so does not qualify as a form of p-representation. Even if successful, however, scenario contents forgo a considerable degree of determinacy and intuitive appeal, since no specific state of affairs is singled out as 'the' content of experience, as well as requiring an account of

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<sup>17</sup> A similar argument may be found in Travis (2005: 310) concerning the extension of the concept *red*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. sect. 2.1.

propositions that can accommodate this. They therefore come at a similar epistemic cost to the representation of appearance properties described above.

A more palatable alternative is that just one of the many possible contents that a visual look may indicate—*being a lemon*, for example—is singled out as the face value of the relevant experience. In this case, the representationalist needs to explain what privileges that content over all of the visually indistinguishable alternatives (or indeed the disjunction of all those alternatives) as *the* content of experience. Moreover, this explanation must make it possible for the subject to recognise that their experience represents *this* and not some ringer, and so can presumably only draw upon facts that are available to the subject from a first-personal perspective. Either way, what started out as the seemingly intuitive and straightforward notion that experiences represent the properties of objects in the world turns out to require considerable further explanation and/or theoretical machinery to ground the relevant content in information that is perceptually available to the subject, if indeed this is possible (sect. 5).

### 3.2 Thinkable looks

Whereas visual looks relate to resemblances between objects, thinkable looks are “very much a matter of what can be gathered from, or what is suggested by, the facts at hand, or those visibly (audibly, etc.) on hand” (Travis 2004: 76). Thinkable looks, or *looks<sub>t</sub>* for short, relate to some particular way that the world could be that is associated with the relevant visual appearance, and so are ideally suited to making p-representational content recognisable. Indeed, it is plausible that *looks<sub>t</sub>* just *are* those contents that visual experiences incline a perceiver to judge or believe under the circumstances (cf. Travis 2004: 77), corresponding to what Chisholm (1957: 44) called ‘epistemic looks’. It is doubtful, however, that the contents which are indexed by, or identical to, *looks<sub>t</sub>* are apparent to the subject solely in virtue of what is perceptually available in experience, as *Availability* requires.

For example, if Arvo sees what he takes to be a lemon in front of him, then the relevant object looks<sub>t</sub> to him as if it is a lemon. But for all that, he might equally have taken the same object to be a lemon-shaped bar of soap had he enjoyed a qualitatively indistinguishable experience in a different context—upon walking into a chemist's shop, for example. This is presumably not due to any difference in the visual information about the object that is available to him in the relevant experience since the two experiences are qualitatively indistinguishable, but a matter of what he takes to be the case *on the basis of* that information. (That both objects look to Arvo *like* lemons is irrelevant here, since this is a fact about Arvo's subjective experience that is not answerable to any mind-independent property of the external world, and so fails to satisfy *Objectivity*, as discussed above.) Rather, what differs between the two situations is not how things perceptually appear, but what the subject is inclined to infer on the basis of their total evidence under the circumstances. Such inferences are a matter of judgement or interpretation, and not of experience, which can, on standard assumptions, only convey how things visually (audibly, tactually, etc.) appear. It is therefore difficult to see how perceptual experience alone could enable the subject to discern which perceptually indistinguishable possibility is represented therein.

Looks<sub>t</sub> involve a form of representation whose content, Travis (2004: 76) argues, cannot be 'given' in perception since it is already taken by the subject to be true. Consequently, looks<sub>t</sub> are in danger of collapsing into, on the one hand, belief or judgement, i.e. "autorepresentation", or, on the other hand, merely "indicating" (*ibid.* 67) what is expected under the circumstances, taking all the available evidence into account. Whilst this is presumably part of the intended role of p-representation, it cannot be what makes perceptual contents recognisable for the reason given above: it is not a (wholly) perceptual phenomenon, but an epistemic one. If, *per impossibile*, looks<sub>t</sub> were what made the contents of experiences recognisable, then they would do so in virtue of a state—namely, belief—that is, by all accounts, explanatorily subsequent to experience, since looks<sub>t</sub> would themselves be dependent upon the subject's

background beliefs. Thus, the content of experience would be recognisable in virtue of some further state supposedly formed on the basis of experience, and not solely in virtue of experience itself, thus contravening *Availability* and potentially leading to a vicious regress.

It might seem unproblematic to some representationalists for the relevant contents to be recognisable in virtue of beliefs or other states 'downstream' of experience (cf. Siegel 2010: 51). However, this cannot form part of an argument for the existence of p-representational content since the contents of beliefs are supposed to depend upon the contents of experiences, and not the other way around, as well as contravening both *Givenness* and *Face Value*. Moreover, as noted above, that beliefs are representational is common ground between representationalists and their opponents, and so strictly neutral between these two views. Consequently, thinkable looks cannot be what make p-representational content recognisable since the information that determines what is represented according to them is not available to the subject in virtue of how things perceptually appear. Thus, looks<sub>t</sub> are not wholly perceptual, as per P3.

### 3.3 Looks-indexing

Having ruled out both looks<sub>v</sub> and looks<sub>t</sub> as being what makes the content of experience available to the subject, the question arises as to whether some other notion of looks or appearances could do the job of indexing p-representational content. After all, we have as yet been given no reason to think that Travis's notions of visual and thinkable looks are exhaustive. Travis goes on to claim in P4, however, that no such 'hybrid' notion of looks is possible.

Travis's argument for this point is that while *Availability* pushes the representationalist towards visual looks, which contravene *Face Value*, *Face Value* itself pushes the representationalist towards thinkable looks, which contravene *Availability*. Thus, either (a) appearances are wholly perceptual, in which case they fail to pick out any particular way that the world must be in order for things to look the way they do,

and so are equivocal between contents, i.e. P2, or (b) appearances index, or are identical to, the contents of epistemic states that are themselves supposedly derived from experience, in which case they are univocal but not wholly perceptual, since the information that is perceptually available to the subject is insufficient to identify the relevant content, as per P3. The dual constraints of *Face Value* and *Availability* are, according to Travis, therefore in tension with one another such that they cannot be jointly satisfied by any one notion of looks. If this is right, then the very idea of a univocal, objective and wholly perceptual look is itself incoherent.

Nevertheless, some of Travis's critics, including Byrne (2009) and Schellenberg (2011b), argue that:

*Response 2:* Some further, e.g. 'non-comparative' or 'phenomenal', notion of looks is capable of satisfying both *Face Value* and *Looks-indexing*.<sup>19</sup>

I consider this response in sect. 4.3 below. However, if Travis is right that these conditions are irreconcilable, then experiences cannot be looks-indexed, and so P1 must be rejected. This yields a further response to the argument:

*Response 3:* Reject *Looks-indexing*.

This brings us to the second horn of Travis's dilemma, on which the representationalist faces the difficulty of specifying how, if it is not in virtue of appearances, *Availability* might be satisfied. To reject *Availability* outright would make it difficult to claim any substantive explanatory role for representational content at the level of experience, thus calling into question the very notion of p-representation. Rejecting *Face Value* or any of Travis's other conditions, however, similarly threatens to weaken or undermine the view. The dilemma is pressing in part because it is difficult to see what else could take the place of *Looks-indexing* in making p-representational

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<sup>19</sup> Byrne (2009) also claims to reject *Looks-indexing*, though it is unclear that he takes this condition to play the role that is described here.

content recognisable, though there are alternative options available. As I argue in sect. 5, however, each of the above responses places a substantial explanatory burden upon the representationalist that cannot be easily discharged in a way that decisively favours their view over competing anti-representationalist explanations of the contents of the resulting perceptual judgements, beliefs or actions.

#### 4. Common Misinterpretations

Having established the basic structure of Travis's argument, I now wish to examine some putative objections to it and how one might respond to them. Each of these involves some misunderstanding that has become prevalent in the literature. They concern the semantics of 'looks', the individuation of perceptual content, and 'non-comparative' or phenomenal looks, respectively.

##### 4.1. The semantic objection

A number of commentators take Travis's argument to concern the semantics of the term 'looks' and its cognates. Susuanna Siegel, for example, discusses the following objection to the representational view: "No actual uses of *looks* (or *looks F*) and its cognates in ordinary English exclusively track what is presented in experience" (2010: 59). Siegel attributes a version of this objection to Travis, who she claims "raises doubts that any actual uses of *looks* in English report contents of visual perceptual experience" (*ibid.* 60). However, as should be clear from the above formulation of Travis's argument, it concerns the metaphysics and epistemology of appearances, and not the semantics of 'looks' in English or any other language. Consequently, even if, as Siegel suggests, no use of 'looks' were to track the alleged contents, the argument from looks would still stand. That we sometimes *describe* experiences using terms like 'looks', 'appears', and so on, is therefore beside the point.

Alex Byrne (2009) similarly takes Travis to be making a semantic point, claiming that "Travis is wrong to conclude that our ordinary talk provides no support for [the

content view]" (*ibid.* 444). Byrne rebuts this conclusion by arguing that "we use 'looks' to convey information about the non-comparative looks of things", which he identifies with "the familiar 'phenomenal use'" of 'looks' (*ibid.* 441; see below). However, this again misunderstands the role of looks in Travis's argument. The point is not that our everyday looks-talk fails to support representationalism, but that perceptual appearances themselves are incapable of making p-representational content available. Appearances, or looks, are (according to Travis) either equivocal or non-perceptual, neither of which can explain the availability of perceptual content to the subject.

No doubt these misunderstandings are in part due to Travis's (2004) identifying thinkable looks via the English locution "looks as if" in the indicative mood, and visual looks with "looks like", which is typically (though not always) comparative. As Travis notes, the issue is complicated by the fact that each of these phrases can be used to signify either comparative or epistemic looks, making them ambiguous between Travis's two notions. The argument from looks, however, does not turn on these linguistic points, and the above terminology is subsequently replaced with "visual looks" and "thinkable looks" in Travis (2013a). Even in the original version of his paper, Travis states that he means "to point to usage to distinguish two notions of looks" and that "[w]hat matters is that we are conscious of the differences between these notions when it comes to asking just what notion of looks might serve a representationalist's purpose" (2004: 75–76). To reject Travis's critique on the basis of whether English usage tracks, or otherwise, the relevant notions therefore fails to engage with the substance of his argument which concerns the metaphysics and epistemology of appearances, and not the semantics of 'looks'.

#### 4.2. *The triviality objection*

A second misinterpretation of Travis's argument is that it concerns what determines or individuates the content of perceptual experience, rather than what makes that content recognisable. According to this version of the argument, Travis aims to show that



appearances, as manifested in visual phenomenology, underdetermine the contents of experience, and so cannot be what fixes that content (cf. Burge 2010: 344). However, few, if any, representationalists take appearances to play this role, in part for that very reason. Indeed, most representationalists hold that the order of explanation is precisely the other way around, and that it is representational content that determines perceptual appearances or phenomenology (i.e. *intentionalism*), and not *vice versa*. The objection, then, is that Travis merely establishes what is already common ground between him and his opponents. Hence even if the argument from looks is valid, it is trivial or irrelevant, since representationalism does not require that perceptual contents are determined by appearances.

A version of this objection is given by Siegel (2010), who argues that Travis's question of establishing which of a range of possible contents a given experience has "seems flawed, driven as it is by the idea that demonstrable [i.e. visual] looks might fix contents of experience" (*ibid.* 62).<sup>20</sup> Siegel goes on to claim that looks are "irrelevant to fixing the content of experience" (*ibid.*), as Travis would no doubt agree. However, the argument from looks does not concern what *determines* p-representational contents, but rather how those contents are *recognisable*, or available to the subject, such that one can 'read off' or otherwise grasp the face value of one's experiences. Indeed, one of Travis's contributions to the debate is that he draws attention to this very distinction which has been ignored or glossed over by many other philosophers of perception.

The triviality objection is therefore flawed since it ignores the central role of *Availability* in Travis's argument. Indeed, the suggestion that the content of experience is determined by something other than appearances arguably makes the problem worse, and not better, for the representationalist (sect. 5.1).

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<sup>20</sup> By "demonstrable looks", Travis means visual appearances demonstrably possessed by objects and which are not specific to any given subject's experience. However, Siegel clearly takes this to mean visual looks, and the term is dropped in Travis (2013a).

#### 4.3. The phenomenal looks objection

A more pressing objection to Travis is the one to which I alluded in response 2 above: that he neglects to consider a further 'non-comparative' notion of looks—namely, *phenomenal looks*, or *looks<sub>p</sub>*. These are characterised by Frank Jackson as

...being explicitly tied to terms for color, shape, and/or distance: 'It looks *blue* to me', 'It looks *triangular*', 'The tree looks *closer than* the house', 'The top line looks *longer than* the bottom line', 'There looks to be a *red square* in the middle of the white wall', and so on. That is, instead of terms like 'cow', 'house', 'happy', we have, in the phenomenal use, terms like 'red', 'square', and 'longer than'.

(Jackson 1977: 33)

If *looks<sub>p</sub>* were capable of combining aspects of visual and thinkable looks such that they are both wholly perceptual and capable of making face-value content recognisable, then P4 of Travis's argument would be false, and the argument would fail to go through. Indeed, Byrne (2009) and Brogaard (ms, 2015b) argue that Travis is himself committed to the existence of some such notion of looks, based on his definition of visual looks, which is as follows:

[S]omething looks thus-and-so, or like such-and-such, where it looks the way such-and-such, or things which are (were) thus-and-so, does (would, might) look.

(Travis 2004: 69–70)

Unpacking the somewhat convoluted grammar of this passage, it is apparent that 'looks' appears in both the *explanandum* ("looks thus-and-so, or like such-and-such") and *explanans* ("looks the way ... does"). If both occurrences are supposed to refer to comparative looks then Travis's definition would be circular since *looks<sub>v</sub>* would be defined in terms of themselves, yielding an apparent regress.<sup>21</sup> The latter use of 'looks',

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<sup>21</sup> The regress is merely apparent since, provided that for all *F*s, *looking<sub>v</sub> F* can be defined in terms of *looking<sub>v</sub> G*, where *F* and *G* are non-identical, and *looking<sub>v</sub> G* is not itself defined in terms that appeal to *looking<sub>v</sub> F*, then no regress is generated, as is consistent with the comparative analysis of *looks<sub>p</sub>* below.

Byrne and Brogaard argue, must therefore refer to some further non-comparative notion of looks. Since these are presumably not epistemic looks, then Travis is committed to the existence of non-comparative phenomenal looks, i.e. looks<sub>p</sub>, in terms of which his other two notions may be defined.

The above objection, however, is flawed. First, as discussed below, it is not clear that phenomenal looks, if there are such things, are non-comparative. Second, despite Travis's use of examples like "looks like a Vermeer" (*ibid.* 75) or looking "as if Pia will sink the putt" (*ibid.* 78), his argument applies equally to so-called 'visual primitives' like *looking blue* or *looking triangular*—precisely the terms in which Jackson defines phenomenal looks.<sup>22</sup> According to Travis, looks<sub>p</sub> are equally susceptible to ringers—e.g. looking white-in-blue-light, or looking like a tetrahedron seen face-on, respectively—and so are similarly equivocal between contents. Moreover, it is controversial whether there is any such set of primitives in terms of which all visual appearances may be defined, and if so, precisely what they are. While this is presumably an empirical matter that may be investigated via scientific study of the human visual system, in the absence of such knowledge it is unclear how naïve subjects are supposed to be capable of grasping what is represented to them in experience if they are unaware of what the relevant primitives are (sect. 5.1). Nor should such knowledge be necessary in order to interpret one's own visual experiences.

Travis's definition of looks<sub>v</sub>, if indeed it is such, is intended to highlight the fundamentally comparative nature of visual looks. However, we could equally well replace it with the following alternative analysis:

$x$  looks<sub>v</sub>  $F$  [to  $S$ ] iff  $x$  has visually relevant similarities [from  $S$ 's point of view, under relevant circumstances  $k$ ] to paradigm exemplars of  $F$ .<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Notably, Jackson, who is often cited as a defender of the existence of phenomenal looks, takes them to ground a form of sense-datum theory, and not representationalism.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Brewer (2006: 169).

According to Brewer (2006, 2007, 2011), looks are grounded in similarity relations between objects in virtue of their visually detectible properties.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for something to look red, for example, is for it to possess visually relevant similarities to paradigmatically red things, such as a ripe tomato seen in full daylight. Brewer's notion of a "visually relevant similarity" may in turn be cashed out in terms of the primitive dispositions of perceivers to judge that two stimuli, under contextually-determined circumstances  $k$ , are similar in some visually detectible respect, such as their colour or shape. Importantly for Brewer, perceivers need not be consciously aware of these similarities. Rather, the relevant similarities need merely exist in order for the corresponding looks claims to obtain. Thus looking<sub>v</sub> is not, for Brewer, a representational notion.

Crucially for present purposes, Brewer's comparative analysis of looks may equally be applied to looks<sub>p</sub>, with even supposed visual primitives like *looking blue*, *looking triangular* etc. being analysed as involving an implicit comparison. If this is correct, then Byrne and Brogaard's objection to Travis collapses since the terms 'appearance' or 'look' do not appear on the right-hand side of the above biconditional, thereby avoiding the alleged regress. Furthermore, Travis's argument against looks<sub>v</sub> may now be applied to looks<sub>p</sub> which, when analysed in comparative terms, are similarly equivocal between contents, and so cannot satisfy *Looking-indexing*. Whether or not looks<sub>p</sub> are comparative or not is therefore a central question that needs to be addressed by any proponent of the phenomenal looks objection.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the absence of independent grounds for preferring Byrne and Brogaard's non-comparative analysis of looks<sub>p</sub> over more parsimonious comparative accounts (cf. Martin 2010), the argument between Travis and the representationalist remains a stand-off, with the mere availability of the comparative analysis effectively neutralising the phenomenal looks objection.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Martin (2010), who takes looks to be properties of external objects.

<sup>25</sup> See Martin (2010) and Brogaard (ms, 2015b) for further discussion.

No doubt more remains to be said on both sides about this kind of defence of Travis's P4. However, neither are phenomenal looks the knock-down objection that Byrne and Brogaard appear to suggest. The difficulty for the representationalist is that the connection between *looking<sub>p</sub> ψ* and *representing ψ* cannot be taken for granted—for example, on semantic grounds—since this is part of what is at issue in Travis's argument from looks. Consequently, the argument cannot be dismissed simply by appealing to phenomenal looks, since (a) such looks may be implicitly comparative, and so equivocal in terms of their content, and (b) it is unclear that looks<sub>p</sub> are capable of making objectively assessable content available, as opposed to, for example, denoting purely subjective states of the perceiver (cf. Glüer 2009; sect. 3.1). So, while it remains open to the representationalist to argue that a 'non-comparative' or 'thin' notion of looks is capable of making perceptual content recognisable, as per response 2, it remains to be shown that looks<sub>p</sub> can play this role.

## 5. The Challenge for Representationalism

Setting the above misunderstandings aside, Travis's challenge to the representationalist may be stated as follows:

- (i) If visual experiences were p-representational, then their contents should be "recognizable", or cognitively available, to the subject solely in virtue of their having the relevant experience, as per *Availability\** (sect. 2.2). Plausibly, this occurs on the basis of how, in experience, things perceptually appear, or look, to the subject (*Looks-indexing*).
- (ii) But visual looks (looks<sub>v</sub>) are comparative, and so equivocal between a potentially infinite series of objectively assessable contents or states of affairs. Looks<sub>v</sub> are therefore incapable of making the relevant face-value content available. (To this we might add that phenomenal looks are similarly unsuited to making such

contents available since (a) they too may be implicitly comparative, and (b) they arguably lack objective import; i.e. they have narrow or 'thin' contents.)

- (iii) Thinkable or epistemic looks ( $\text{looks}_t$ ), on the other hand, draw upon the subject's beliefs in a way that is incompatible with their being constitutive of perceptual experience, since experience is supposed to be explanatorily prior to judgement. Rather,  $\text{looks}_t$  are perceptual 'takings'—"autorepresentation" in Travis's terms—formed on the basis of experience, but that go beyond what is perceptually available to the subject, and so are not wholly perceptual. Moreover, the resulting contents—of beliefs, for example—cannot themselves constitute evidence for experience being p-representational, since their existence is compatible with the falsity of representationalism.

Assuming, *pace* responses 1 and 2 above, that no further notion of looks is available, the representationalist now faces the following choice. Either:

- (a) perceptual content is consciously available to the subject, but not in virtue of how things appear, or look, and so *Looks-indexing* is false (response 3); or
- (b) perceptual content is not consciously available to the subject, and so *Availability* is false (response 4).

The problem with (a) is that it remains to be explained how, if not in virtue of appearances, perceptual content is cognitively available to the subject. The problem with (b) is that if such contents are *not* available to the subject, then it is difficult to see how they can play any substantive role in the subject's conscious mental life, thus undermining much of the initial motivation for representationalism. I examine each of these alternatives further in the subsections below.

Alternatively, the representationalist might wish to deny one of Travis's other conditions for p-representation, i.e.

*Response 5: Reject Objectivity, Face Value and/or Givenness*

However, this too has the effect of significantly weakening the view since each of these conditions is closely connected, both with each other and with *Looks-indexing*.

*5.1. Rejecting Looks-indexing*

At this point, it might be objected on behalf of representationalism that p-representational content is not cognitively available 'in virtue of' any particular feature of experience, such as appearances, but simply available full stop. That is, it is constitutive of perceptual representation that its content is available to the subject, and not something that needs to be 'added on' after the fact; e.g. in virtue of how things look. This objection is a version of response 3, since it denies *Looks-indexing* in favour of some other way of satisfying *Availability*.

One worry about this response is that it threatens to render the phenomenal character of experience superfluous in the manner of what Mark Johnston calls "The Wallpaper View" (Johnston 2006: 260). According to this view, phenomenal character is a "mere accompaniment" (*ibid.*) or by-product of experience rather than part of any mechanism by which content is made manifest to the subject. As a result, subjects are 'saddled with' perceptual content irrespective of, and independently from, the phenomenal character of experience. This seems contrary to the way that many representationalists characterise their view as involving the 'conveying'—Siegel's (2010: 28) term—of content to the subject by experience, rather than such content merely being self-evident as in the case of belief or judgement.

Assuming that the representationalist means to provide some positive story about how representational content is available to the subject if not in virtue of how things look, we need to distinguish between the following two questions:

- (1) *Individuation question*: What determines, or individuates, p-representational content?

- (2) *Availability question*: what makes p-representational content recognisable, or cognitively available, to the subject?

While (1) has attracted no shortage of philosophical responses: anti-individualism (Burge 1979; 2010), biosemantics (Millikan 1993), asymmetric dependency (Fodor's 1987), informational content (Dretske's 1994), demonstrative content (Burge 1991; McDowell 1994; Brewer 1999), conceptual and/or discriminatory capacities (McDowell 1994; 2008), to name but a few, (2) has barely begun to show up on the philosophical radar. This is problematic because many of the factors that representationalists have taken to determine or individuate the content of experience—distal or proximal stimuli, counterfactual dependencies, historical facts about the evolution of the visual system, and so on—are ones to which perceivers lack independent first-personal access. Assuming that p-representational content is supposed to play some substantive role in our mental lives—indeed, if, as per *Face Value*, we are supposed to be able to tell or otherwise grasp how our experiences represent the world as being—then the representationalist must explain how this is possible given the apparent inaccessibility of the factors that determine such content. That is, they must answer the availability question.

Travis's challenge to the representationalist, then, lies in requiring an answer to both of the above questions in a way that disambiguates at the conscious level between the multiple possible contents that perceptual experiences could have. Thus, it is not sufficient to respond to Travis by explaining what gives experiences their contents. One must also explain how it is possible for those contents to be cognitively available to the subject in thought, reasoning and action. Moreover, in order to constitute an argument in favour of representationalism, this explanation must be one that genuinely favours this view over non-representational alternatives, such as purely relational (Campbell 2002), object-based (Brewer 2006), or Naïve Realist (Martin 2002, 2006; Kalderon 2007) views of experience.



While both representationalists and anti-representationalists accept an explanatory role for mental content, they differ as to whether this should be thought of as occurring within perceptual experience, or only judgements and beliefs, respectively. A further difficulty for the representationalist, then, is that whatever explanation they give for how experiences get their contents such that those very contents are consciously available to the perceiver, can also be co-opted by the anti-representationalist to explain how the corresponding perceptual judgements and/or beliefs get *their* contents. This in turn highlights an important commonality between these apparently competing views concerning the tokening of mental contents that places an emphasis upon the nature and functioning of what we might call perceptual discriminatory capacities, whether these are operative at the level of experience, as the representationalist would have it, or in judgement or belief, as anti-representationalists claim. Whether any of the standard representationalist views can satisfy these constraints, and indeed how anti-representationalists themselves solve the problem of tokening belief-contents, constitute important and under-explored questions that arise directly out of Travis's argument from looks.

## 5.2. Rejecting Availability

The rejection of *Availability*, i.e. response 4, is compatible with representational content forming part of a causal explanation of the sub-personal mechanisms of perception, such as one might find in neuroscience, for example. It does not, however, support *representationalism* as it is here formulated, since the resulting contents are not contents of any conscious experiential state.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this threatens to undermine the very basis of representationalism, since, as Travis might put it, if it is not apparent to me what my experiences represent, then in what sense can they be said to represent anything at all, and to whom? The point here is not that only conscious agents may be represented to, but that the appeal to a familiar metaphor—namely, experiences ‘representing’ various

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<sup>26</sup> For a representational view of this kind, see Burge (2010).

external objects, or states of affairs, to the subject—has been replaced by a much weaker, highly technical notion of representation that is quite distinct from conscious experience. This severely limits the explanatory role of the resulting contents, which collapse into mere sub-personal representation.

This in turn highlights that Travis's challenge to representationalism does not so much concern the existence of perceptual content as its explanatory role. On the one hand, intentionalism emphasises the role of representational content in explaining the phenomenal character of experience. However, it is unclear how the resulting contents extend beyond this to represent the objective states and properties of external objects, thus yielding a form of 'thin' or narrow content. Such a view is, according to Travis, incompatible with the role of p-representation in informing us how the world is, or justifying our beliefs and judgements about anything beyond the subjective quality of experience itself. The epistemic or justificatory role of p-representation, on the other hand, requires that contents have objective purport, and so are assessable with respect to worldly objects and their properties. However, it is no longer clear how it is possible for such contents to be cognitively available to the subject on the basis of perceptual experience alone. Thus the representationalist's explanation of perceptual phenomenology and the epistemic role of p-representation appear to be in tension with each other. Indeed, it is precisely this tension that is highlighted by Travis in his contrast between visual and thinkable looks. Whether it is reconcilable will depend upon precisely what one takes the explanatory role, or roles, of perceptual content to be.

A decisive argument in favour of representationalism, then, must either (a) identify some unique role that the representational content of experience is supposed to play which cannot be adequately explained, or is superior to the explanation given, by its anti-representationalist opponents, or (b) identify some distinctive mechanism by which experiential contents are tokened such that they are cognitively available to the perceiver, but which cannot in turn be co-opted by the anti-representationalist to

explain the contents of the resulting perceptual judgements or beliefs. I am aware of no such views in current philosophy of perception. However, that is not to say that such a view could not be defended—for example, by giving an account of perceptual discriminatory capacities that both token and make perceptual contents consciously available. Thus, while identifying a number of important constraints upon the notion and explanatory role(s) of p-representation, Travis's argument ultimately falls short of ruling out its existence entirely.

## **6. Conclusion**

Despite its intuitive appeal, the claim that perceptual experience is in some sense representational is neither obviously nor trivially true. While I have argued that Travis's argument from looks does not entirely rule out this possibility, it does offer a useful way of sharpening the nature of the disagreement between representationalists and their opponents, as well as hinting at a possible reconciliation centring upon the role of perceptual discriminatory capacities in both tokening and allowing cognitive access to the contents of experience and/or perceptual belief.

By highlighting the various theoretical commitments and explanatory roles that representationalists have taken perceptual content to satisfy, Travis puts pressure upon the suggestion that all of these can be played by a single such content, if indeed they can be satisfied at all. This emphasises the need for greater clarity about the precise explanatory role, or roles, of perceptual content; i.e. not only what it represents, but at which level (e.g. personal or sub-personal), and precisely how this is supposed to explain phenomenal character, the content of belief, the justification of perceptual knowledge, and so on, or some combination thereof. Moreover, in order to constitute an argument for representationalism, this must be done in a way that genuinely favours the view over parallel anti-representationalist explanations of the contents of perceptual beliefs or judgements. To do so requires considerably more argumentation than Travis's opponents have yet provided. To that extent, Travis's argument from

looks remains a serious challenge to a wide range of views that appeal to the existence of representational content in perceptual experience.

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